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‘Red on White’: Kim Il Sung, Park Chung Hee, and the failure of Korea’s reunification, 1971-73

Introduction

The Sino-American rapprochement and Soviet-American détente following President Richard Nixon’s trips to Beijing and Moscow in, respectively, February and May 1972, are widely seen as a key turning point in the Cold War. These events have been studied by generations of scholars, analyzed on their own terms for their significance for regional theaters, from Europe to the Middle East and on to Southeast Asia. Unsurprisingly, 1972 also made a strong impact on Korea, a country divided since 1945, ravaged by war, and then rebuilt as two, the socialist North and the capitalist South.¹ In 1972 North and South Korea engaged in brief dialogue. Tensions lessened and relations thawed amid hopes both North and South of the 38th Parallel that the two sides would come to terms and the country would be reunified at last. It was not to be. After several months of intensive secret diplomacy, the momentum fizzled out. The two Koreas returned to their familiar state of bitter hostility.

Why did the dialogue between the North and the South fail? The easy answer is that neither Seoul nor Pyongyang wanted rapprochement on anything but their own terms.² But if North Korea’s Kim Il Sung and South Korea’s Park Chung Hee were what one would call hardboiled realists, then why was there any dialogue to begin with? It is particularly important to understand Kim’s motivations because far from just meekly reacting to events, the North Korean leader Kim Il Sung was actively driving forward the process of engagement with the South; the most breathtaking initiatives, including the notion of “free travel” between the North and the South, came from Pyongyang, not Seoul. The principles of reunification proclaimed in the famous July 4, 1972 Joint

¹ For previous treatments of this subject, see Bernd Schaefer, “Overconfidence Shattered: North Korean Unification Policy, 1971 -1975,” NKIDP Working Paper No. 2 (December 2010), which inspired this article; also Xia Yafeng and Shen Zhihua, “China’s Last Ally: Beijing’s Policy towards North Korea during the U.S. – China Rapprochement, 1970-1975,” *Diplomatic History*, 38:5 (2014), 1083-1113 and see Charles Armstrong and John Barry Kotch, “Sino-American negotiations on Korea and Kissinger’s UN diplomacy,” *Cold War History*, 15:1 (December 2014), 113-134.

² There is a general historical consensus on this point. See e.g. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: a Contemporary History* (Basic Books, 2001), 23-26; Kim Hyung-A, *Korea’s Development Under Park Chung Hee: Rapid Industrialization, 1961-79* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), Byung-Kook Kim & Ezra F. Vogel (eds), *The Park Chung Hee Era: the Transformation of South Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011), 255.

North-South Statement were formulated by Kim before being endorsed by his southern rival Park Chung Hee.

This article recounts the events of 1972 from the North Korean perspective. Using newly declassified evidence from the Chinese and the Russian archives in addition to Eastern European documentation, we retrace Kim Il Sung's steps towards engagement with South Korea, reconsidering his likely goals and the rationale for his policy decisions. We argue that Kim's flexible tactics – pursuit of contacts with South Korea's ruling party as well as with the opposition, rhetorical moderation, calls for openness – veiled hardened determination to impose the North Korean political and economic system on the South. But in place of his previous efforts to organize a people's uprising in South Korea while bringing regional tensions to the boiling point, Kim Il Sung embraced a different method: to work with his allies to convince the United States to withdraw troops from the ROK, and to engage the South Koreans in the name of peace and unification. The means were different but the aim very much the same. Yet Kim's policies were not a reflection of his growing realization of North Korea's weakness. He did not for a moment think that he was losing the economic race in the inter-Korean Cold War. Rather, Kim Il Sung was confident that North Korea was winning, that time was on its side. His calculations were quite sophisticated but they were based on a staggering misreading of both his international leverage, and his ability to influence South Korean politics. By the end of 1972 Kim found himself outmaneuvered on practically every count.

The external dimension

In Kim Il Sung's mind the key obstacle in the way of Korea's unification was the continued presence of American forces in South Korea. Pyongyang had made the withdrawal of these forces its most important foreign policy objective but there was very little indication until the late 1960s that this objectives would ever be realized. Things began to look more promising, however, after Richard Nixon's election as President of the United States. Promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine in July 1969 highlighted prospects for gradual reduction of U.S. ground presence in Asia, including Vietnam and Korea. In July 1970, despite bitter protests by President Park Chung Hee, the South

Korean government was informed of forthcoming cuts.³ By 1971 the number of US troops on the peninsula dropped from the high of over 66 thousand to just over 40 thousand, a promising development from Kim's perspective. Plans were being discussed in Washington to reduce this number to 20,000 and even as low as 5,000.⁴ But a reduction was not the same as a complete withdrawal: the basic fact of the American military presence, and the security guarantees it offered, remained unchanged.

This was a serious problem for Pyongyang. Kim understood that despite the considerable – or so he imagined it to be – revolutionary potential in the South, any revolution would likely be brutally put down by Park Chung Hee, unless North Korea intervened. But how could it intervene while U.S. forces remained on the ground in South Korea? Kim's 1950 bid to reunify the country nearly ended with the collapse of his regime; he was only bailed out at the 11th hour by his allies, the Chinese and the Soviets (with the Chinese doing most of the fighting). Now a different war was raging in Southeast Asia, giving Kim a chance to ponder what it could mean for the future of the Korean peninsula. Although no clear evidence has yet come to light, it is reasonable to interpret Pyongyang's militant posture, in 1968-69, as directly related to developments in Vietnam. The highlights are well known: there was the January 21, 1968 attempt to infiltrate commandos to Seoul in order to assassinate Park Chung Hee (the would-be assassins were themselves killed, with one captured, in a considerable embarrassment for the North Korean regime). Hardly by coincidence, this was followed days later by the capture of the US intelligence-gather ship *Pueblo* and imprisonment of its crew for months. In April 1969 the North Koreans shot down a US Navy surveillance air plane, the EC-121, killing all 31 American aboard. The rationale behind these radical measures may have been to stir an uprising in South Korea, while testing the reaction of North Korea's allies to heightened tensions in Northeast Asia and imperatively demanding their commitment to Pyongyang.

If so, Kim Il Sung was disappointed on both counts. Revolution in the South failed to materialize. Both Beijing and Moscow had long endorsed North Korea's calls for US withdrawal from Korea.

³ "U.S. notifies Seoul of its plans for removal of some troops," *The New York Times*, July 10, 1970, 10.

⁴ For detailed discussion see Charles Armstrong and John Barry Kitch, "Sino-American negotiations on Korea and Kissinger's UN diplomacy." See also Xia Yafeng and Shen Zhihua, "China's Last Ally: Beijing's Policy towards North Korea during the U.S. – China Rapprochement, 1970-1975," 1091.

But, for different reasons, neither could be relied on to back Kim's militant plans. The Soviet leaders were highly annoyed by the actions of their trigger-happy ally. Despite significantly increasing economic and military aid to North Korea since 1965, Moscow was generally kept at an arm's length and not consulted, even as Kim expected the Soviets to back his actions. On January 31, 1968 the North Korean leader sent a letter to the Soviet leadership requesting, in case a war broke out in Korea, to "mobilize all means" in supporting Pyongyang in accordance with the Soviet-DPRK Treaty of Alliance. Soviet General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev voiced frustration with such treatment and even tried to summon Kim to Moscow for explanations (the 'Great Leader' refused to show up).⁵ Kim was trying, Brezhnev later lamented, "to use the fact of the treaty between the USSR and the DPRK in order to get us involved in supporting plans of the Korean friends, of which we knew nothing."⁶ The North Koreans were told that the relevant articles of the Soviet-DPRK Treaty did not automatically apply.⁷ In May 1969, the head of the Soviet Supreme Soviet, Nikolai Podgornyi, during his talks in Pyongyang, blamed Kim Il Sung for provocative behavior. According to Kim's own later recollections, he told the Soviet visitor that "he [Podgornyi] should go and talk to the Americans and tell them to stop acting like they had."⁸

Thus Kim knew that he could hardly count on the Soviets to follow him to the brink of war. But what of North Korea's other ally, China? Relations between North Korea and China seriously worsened with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in China, which the Chinese radicals attempted to 'export' to wary neighbors, much against the wishes of the "fat revisionist" Kim Il Sung. Tensions boiled over in 1969 with military skirmishes near the Paekdu Mountain and a showdown along the Yalu River.⁹ But Kim realized that it was not in his interest to let the Sino-DPRK conflict to spiral out of control, and when the Chinese extended friendly feelers, he rapidly

⁵ Sergey Radchenko, "The Soviet Union and the North Korean seizure of the USS Pueblo, Evidence from Russian Archives", *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, 47 (March 2005).

⁶ Leonid Brezhnev's speech at the April 1968 CC CPSU Plenum, April 9, 1968. RGANI: fond 2, opis 3, delo 95, list 55.

⁷ Andrei Grechko's speech at the April 1968 CC CPSU Plenum, April 10, 1968. RGANI: fond 2, opis 3, delo 94, list 12.

⁸ Record of conversation between Nicolae Ceausescu and Kim Il Sung, June 10, 1971.

<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/112790>.

⁹ Bernd Schaefer, "North Korean 'Adventurism' and China's Long Shadow, 1966-1972," *Cold War International History Project Working Paper*, 44 (October 2004).

reciprocated, restoring relations to amity by the end of 1969. In October 1969 Mao went out of his way to emphasize special friendship between China and North Korea, telling a visiting North Korean official Choe Yong-gon how Kim Il Sung's direction was correct, and how their goals were one and the same. On hearing Choi's reservations that North Korea could not follow China in confronting the Soviet Union, Mao readily agreed that it should not, because unlike China it depended on the Soviet military and economic aid.¹⁰

In 1970 – the twentieth anniversary of the Korean war – Kim Il Sung made further efforts to improve relations with Beijing, dispatching several high-ranking delegations to China. Mao was appreciative. He blamed past troubles on the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, which, the Chinese leader claimed, he himself did not understand. Unlike the Soviets who were deeply frustrated with Kim Il Sung's militant policies, Mao commended Pyongyang on its position. "You are the frontlines," he told a visiting North Korean military delegation. "We're a bit farther back, so we can understand that kind of nervousness on your part." He went even further, promising free arms to the North Koreans should a war break out: "Your people are bleeding, fighting on the frontlines, [you] need some firearms and bullets, and [we're] going to talk prices [with you]? We have a rule, [we] don't sell arms; we don't do arms business."¹¹ This was undoubtedly good news for Kim Il Sung who, for all his repeated assertions of self-reliance, continued to depend heavily on both the Chinese and the Soviet largesse.

During Kim Il Sung's visit to China in October 1970 Mao and Kim assured each other up their rediscovered friendship. Not all of the records of the trip are yet available but those in the authors' possession give an interesting glimpse into the direction of the discussions. Mao helpfully defended Kim's militant behavior. "Some people generally say we [the Chinese and the North Koreans] are warmongers and adventurers," Mao said. "But our adventure was started by you [shi nimen da laile ma]; only after your planes, your boats have come, did we hit. You have come for an adventure and we are just defending ourselves." Mao offered something of a self-criticism, suggesting that China has not offered enough help to the world's revolutionary forces. But, he

¹⁰ Conversation between Mao Zedong and Choe Yong-gon, October 1, 1969. *Mao Zedong yu Waibing Tanhua Jilu Huibian* (an internal CCP publication).

¹¹ Conversation between Mao Zedong and a North Korean military delegation, July 29, 1970. *Mao Zedong yu Waibing Tanhua Jilu Huibian* (an internal CCP publication).

added, “I say if you don’t help then you have betrayed the revolution!” He complimented Kim Il Sung on his war preparations and tunnel-building, and lamented that China was lagging behind, and may therefore be caught off-guard. In what was likely meant as banter rather than a serious policy suggestion, Mao even suggested that China might build a tunnel from Changchun or Shenyang in Manchuria under the Yalu River and all the way to the 38th parallel. This was Mao’s way of saying that China could be counted upon to help North Korea in the hour of need, unlike the Soviet Union. “Relying on the Soviet Union to come and help you or help us is hopeless,” Mao told Kim. The North Korean leader indicated his agreement with this assessment, saying that in the past they had illusions about the Soviets but that it had since become clear that the Soviet Union was “colluding with the South Korean puppets.”¹²

Kim Il Sung thus faced a very interesting situation with his allies. The mightier of the two, the Soviet Union, was clearly dissatisfied with Pyongyang’s militant policies and put pressure on Kim to pursue a more moderate course, telling him that the alliance treaty between two countries did not automatically apply, which was the same as saying that should the North Koreans start a war, Moscow would not bail Kim out. China, despite earlier frictions with North Korea, came around by 1970 to support Kim Il Sung’s militant rhetoric, which helps explain the rapid rapprochement between the two following their border conflict. But would China back Kim’s war against the South? None of the available documents show the Chinese making such guarantees, nor, as far as we can tell, did Kim Il Sung ever ask. Just months after his conversations with Mao, Kim explained to a fellow Communist bloc dictator Nicolae Ceausescu that in view of the system of alliances in Korea, one could accidentally – “if we are not careful” – trigger a global war. This, he said, was something that neither the Soviets nor the Chinese would support.¹³

Kim had to yield to these geopolitical realities. It is unlikely that he contemplated anything like a big war in Korea by the turn of the decade. Kim had been preoccupied with creating a revolutionary situation in South Korea but, for all the presumed dissatisfaction with Park Chung Hee, this situation had clearly not materialized. Instead, following the 1970 Presidential election Park

¹² Conversations between Mao Zedong and Kim Il Sung, October 8 & 10, 1970. *Mao Zedong yu Waibing Tanhua Jilu Huibian* (an internal CCP publication). Also, Shanghai Municipal Archives, B-120-2-16. The two partial transcripts of these conversations do not overlap.

¹³ Conversation between Kim Il Sung and Nicolae Ceausescu, June 10, 1971.

consolidated his rule. The U.S., despite the proclamation of the Nixon doctrine, remained lodged in South Korea. By 1971 Kim faced two options: either continue with the radical policies that had thus far failed to dislodge the Americans from the South or to try something else. In the event, circumstances conspired to make the choice even more obvious.

In July 1971, following months of secret contacts, Nixon's National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger turned up in China for talks with Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, heralding the beginning of the Sino-American rapprochement. Although a North Korean envoy was in China at the time (on the occasion of the 1961 Sino-DPRK Treaty of Alliance), he was not notified in advance (nor were China's other friends). Still, the Korean question was discussed, if briefly, in the Zhou-Kissinger meetings. In a conversation with Zhou on July 9, 1971, Kissinger commented that "if the relationship between our countries develop as they might, after the Indochina war ends and the ROK troops return to Korea, I would think it quite conceivable that before the end of the next term of President Nixon, most, if not all, American troops will be withdrawn from Korea."¹⁴ Kim was briefed on these discussions when Zhou Enlai travelled to Pyongyang days after Kissinger's departure (on July 15-17). Their two meetings lasted seven hours. Unlike the Vietnamese who were outraged by the perceived Chinese betrayal of their interests, the North Koreans concluded that the Sino-American rapprochement offered a unique opportunity to affect American withdrawal from Korea. In the following months Kim Il Sung attempted to capitalize on these developments in a bid to achieve Korean unification on his terms.

On August 6, 1971, Kim Il Sung publically announced his support for the Sino-American rapprochement. The 'Great Leader' said that Nixon's visit to China would be a "great victory for the Chinese people and the revolutionary peoples worldwide."¹⁵ Kim's support was symbolically important for the Chinese, given particularly the disappointment among some of China's other allies, such as Albania and North Vietnam. But Kim was merely looking after his own interests. On July 30 he sent Deputy Premier Kim Il to Beijing with a new Eight-Point Proposal with the

¹⁴ Memcon Zhou Enlai - Kissinger, 9 July 1971, 4:35-11:20pm. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) 1969-1972, Vol. XVII, China 1969-1972*, ed. U.S. Department of State (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), 390.

¹⁵ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 273-275.

Americans during Kissinger's next visit to China, which called for U.S. withdrawal from Korea.¹⁶ Zhou did so on October 22. Kissinger's reaction was decidedly unenthusiastic but at least he promised that "our present plan is to withdraw a substantial percentage of our forces from South Korea in the next years. If the tensions in the Far East continue to diminish, the number of forces in Korea can be expected to be very small." Kissinger also assured Zhou that the Japanese would not be allowed to replace departing US troops on the South Korean soil.¹⁷

On January 26, 1972, the North Korean Deputy Premier Bak Seongcheol travelled to China to consult with the Chinese concerning the Korean component of Richard Nixon's forthcoming visit. Members of Pyongyang's delegation reportedly remained in China during Nixon's visit that February. There were rumors that Kim Il Sung himself secretly visited Beijing at the time, though the North Koreans denied this.¹⁸ Soviet diplomats in Pyongyang speculated that North Korean representatives could even meet with members of Nixon's delegation.¹⁹ But no such thing happened. The Chinese kept the North Koreans well away from the American delegation, though they did broach the Korean issue in the course of the negotiations. In the meantime, Kim Il Sung emphasized in his public statements that differences in political and social systems no longer posed an insurmountable barrier for reunification, even as he stressed the impediment posed by the U.S. presence in the South.²⁰ In an interview to *The New York Times* in May 1972, Kim Il Sung noted that the Sino-American rapprochement and the onset of détente in Soviet-American relations meant that there was no longer a need for American troops to remain in South Korea to "protect the latter from communism."²¹

¹⁶ Choi Myeong-hae, *The China-DPRK Alliance* (Seoul: Oreum, 2009), p. 285. Also: Seuk-Ryule Hong, "U.S.-China Relations and Inter-Korean Relations in the early 1970s," Conference Paper, East China Normal University Shanghai, June 4, 2009.

¹⁷ Memcon Zhou Enlai – Kissinger, Beijing, October 22, 1971, 4:15-8:28 p.m. *FRUS, Volume E-13, Documents on China 1969-1972*, Document #44.

See: <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve13/d44>. For a detailed discussion see Xia and Shen, "China's Last Ally," 1095.

¹⁸ GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Memorandum on a Conversation with the 1st Secretary of the Embassy of the Soviet Union, Comrade Kurbatov, on January 7, 1972. PoIA AA, MfAA, C 944/76.

¹⁹ GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Memorandum on a Conversation with the 2nd Secretary of the Embassy of the Soviet Union, Comrade Gorovoy, on February 18, 1972. PoIA AA, MfAA, C 6853.

²⁰ GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Monthly Report on the Policy of the PRC (February/March 1972), March 10, 1972, p. 11, PoIA AA, MfAA, C 507/72.

²¹ *NYT*, May 31, 1972, 14.

Thus, in early 1972 Kim Il Sung made an extra effort to court China and to make sure the Korean question stayed close to the Chinese agenda as Beijing worked out its own new relationship with Washington. Whether he succeeded in his efforts is another matter. The Soviet assessment, written some months after Nixon's summit in Beijing, suggests that Kim was basically disappointed by what transpired in Sino-American negotiations. Soviet diplomats in Pyongyang reported to Moscow, with evident glee, that the "Korean comrades probably expected more" from Nixon's visit to Beijing but that they saw that "the leaders in Beijing are more concerned about their own interests and only occasionally, in passing, remember about the DPRK." In their estimate, China was in fact much more interested in maintaining division in Korea than in achieving reunification and it was already becoming evident to the North Koreans that by putting too much faith in China they risked becoming a trading chip in Beijing's geopolitical games. (Interestingly, Soviet diplomats shared this cynical impression of China's position with Kissinger).²² It was this fear of being sold out by the Chinese that drove Kim Il Sung to seek direct approaches to the United States and to Japan.²³

Whether or not the Soviets were right about Kim's disappointment with Sino-American rapprochement, he clearly decided to spread his eggs around by simultaneously courting Moscow. As often the case with North Korea, evidence that something was afoot came in the form of Kim Il Sung's sudden courtesy to Soviet diplomats and a generally better attitude towards Soviet residents in the DPRK from the spring of 1972. Reports of such improved attitude were meticulously written down by officials at the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang and forwarded to Moscow, which is how we know, for instance, that a Soviet citizen named N.I. Em, whose husband used to be the North Korean education minister before being sent to the mines, found all of her neighbors to be on much better terms with her than in the past, that they spoke warmly of the better days of Soviet-North Korean friendship and even lamented Pyongyang's over-reliance on the Chinese.²⁴ Kim Il Sung himself made a point of highlighting great Soviet-North Korean amity in a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador in April 1972. Kim emphasized how the Korean

²² Xia and Shen, "China's Last Ally," 1096.

²³ Soviet Embassy in the DPRK, report, December 8, 1972. RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 422, listy 230-239.

²⁴ Report on a conversation with a Soviet citizen N.I. Em, May 5, 1972. RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 424, listy 26-27.

revolution owed its very existence to the Soviet revolution, how he had always been inspired by the teachings of Lenin, and how the North Korean people achieved liberation “only with the help of the Soviet army.” Describing Moscow and Pyongyang as “class brothers-in-arms,” Kim promised that Soviet-North Korean friendship will “last forever.”²⁵ This was of course dramatically different from what the ‘Great Leader’ had been telling the Chinese about alleged Soviet betrayal of North Korea’s interests.

Kim Il Sung never made such statements for free. Just as with the Sino-North Korean rapprochement of 1970-71, the DPRK leader had in mind very practical ends: not just economic and military aid but also, unsurprisingly, Moscow’s diplomatic support in ousting the U.S. from South Korea. The opportunity to procure such support came with the May 1972 Nixon-Brezhnev summit in Moscow, which inaugurated Soviet-American détente. In early April Kim Il Sung decided to send Bak Seongcheol to talk to Brezhnev and, as in the case of Bak’s earlier performance in China, to strive to put the Korean question on the agenda of the superpowers in a way favorable to Pyongyang. The very day that Kim harped on the theme of eternal Soviet-North Korean friendship in Pyongyang, Bak Seongcheol saw Brezhnev in Moscow to outline Kim’s expectations of the Soviet-American summit.²⁶ The records of these discussions are not yet available but Kim Il Sung made his position clear enough in other conversations he held with Soviet officials around this time. What he mostly wanted to emphasize was that North Korea would not launch a war against the South. “Our general policy,” Kim told Soviet Ambassador N.G. Sudarikov, “is to reunify the country by peaceful means. We have no intention to attack South Korea. Although Park Chung Hee keeps spreading rumors about our militant intentions, this is all lies.”²⁷ Elaborating two weeks later why North Korea needed such a large army if it “did not want war and had no intention to fight with the South,” Kim commented that it was necessary to make the southerners “pause and think” [prizadumatsya].²⁸

²⁵ Conversation between Kim Il Sung and N.G. Sudarikov, April 13, 1972. RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 1-5.

²⁶ Date of the meeting is taken from Leonid Brezhnev’s diary. No records have yet surfaced.

²⁷ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, April 9, 1972, list 8. RGANI: fond 5, fond 64, delo 423, listy 6-14.

²⁸ Conversation between Kim Il Sung and a Soviet military delegation, April 24, 1972. RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 15-18.

Did Kim Il Sung's effort to reach out to the United States through Brezhnev pay off? In a June 23 meeting with the 'Great Leader' the Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Ignatii Novikov assured Kim that Bak Seongcheol's representations allowed Brezhnev to "deeply understand the DPRK's position" and to raise the question "very firmly" before Nixon. According to Novikov, Brezhnev demanded withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea and asked that Washington stop from interfering in the internal affairs of the Korean people. Kim was delighted to hear about Brezhnev's support and commented, with satisfaction, that it "dealt a blow against our common enemies." He then went on to describe the Moscow summit as a victory for all socialist countries but demurred when asked to express this position publicly. Kim had no intention to antagonize the Chinese.²⁹ One curious element of this episode is that the records of the Soviet-American summit barely touch on the Korean question. Brezhnev only raised the issue once, on May 29, in passing. Kim, Brezhnev said, had assured him that North Korea was in favor of peaceful reunification, that they were prepared to have "good relations" with the U.S., and that there was the question of the U.S. presence in South Korea, which caused the Soviets some "concern."³⁰ The manner in which these issues were raised showed that Brezhnev did not care to lean on Nixon to do anything at all about the Korean question. Indeed, the Soviet charge that the Chinese had been looking after their own interests and were merely using Korea as a trading chip could be applied just as well to the Soviet position.

The intra-Korean dimension

Enticing the United States to withdraw from South Korea was only half of the equation for Kim Il Sung. In 1971-72 Kim reached out directly to Seoul in a bid to come to an agreement with his rival Park Chung Hee and pave way for Korea's unification. In his speech on August 6, the same speech where he commended China on inviting Nixon, Kim offered to hold direct talks with all South Korean parties, including the ruling Democratic Republican Party.³¹ A week later the South Korean Red Cross proposed talks with its opposite number in North Korea. The Red Cross

²⁹ Conversation between Kim Il Sung and Ignatii Novikov, June 23, 1972. RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 20-32.

³⁰ Memcon Nixon – Brezhnev, Moscow, May 29, 1972, 10:20am-12:20pm. *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume 14, Soviet Union, October 1971 – May 1972*, 1221.

³¹ Schaefer, *North Korean Adventurism and China's Long Shadow*, 34.

talks began on September 21 with the ostensibly humanitarian purpose of reuniting families separated by the Korean War. Yet the inter-Korean Red Cross meetings also served as a useful cover for initiation of deeper contacts and holding political discussions.

In early 1972, the two sides agreed to establish an unprecedented secret channel between the head of the South Korean intelligence agency Lee Hurak and North Korea's Workers' Party Department for Organization and Guidance Kim Yeong-ju, who was Kim Il Sung's brother and, at the time, was seen as second-in-command in Pyongyang. Soon, however, for reasons still unknown, Kim was replaced by the North Korean Deputy Premier Bak Seongcheol. In late spring 1972 Lee and Bak exchanged secret visits. Lee travelled to Pyongyang from May 2 to 5, and Bak turned up in Seoul on May 29, staying until June 1. The high-ranking messengers met with the respective leaders of the two countries, Lee with Kim Il Sung and Bak with Park Chung Hee. These occasions witnessed dramatic and revealing conversations about the future of the Korean nation and the two Koreas' relations with great powers. Kim Il Sung and Park Chung Hee emphasized, in curiously similar terms, how great Korea would become once its two halves were rejoined. "With the heavy industry the North has developed and the industrial might of the South, combined, there is no great power we should be envious of," argued Park. "The great powers and the Imperialists are keen to divide a nation and split them into many," echoed Kim, telling Lee Hurak in May that "we should move onto the path of solidarity rather than falling for others' plots... We shouldn't depend on foreigners."³²

In his conversation with Lee Hurak, Kim Il Sung explained how reunification was to be accomplished. First, he said, the two Koreas had to do it without involvement of any foreign powers. Secondly, it had to be peaceful, non-violent unification. Thirdly, concerning the type of regime a reunified Korea would have, Kim asked Lee to keep the issue "off the table" for the time-being.³³ Park Chung Hee endorsed these ideas in his later conversation with the North Korean envoy and, on July 4, 1972, the two sides simultaneously issued the "Joint Declaration of South and North," which called for unification on the basis of Kim's above-mentioned points. The

³² Conversation between Park Chung Hee and Bak Seongcheol, May 31, 1972, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/114596> and Conversation between Lee Hurak and Kim Il Sung, May 4, 1972, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110780>.

³³ Conversation between Lee Hurak and Kim Il Sung, May 4, 1972.

Declaration promised the establishment of a South-North Coordinating Committee chaired by Lee Hurak and Kim Il Sung's brother, raising prospects of a political superstructure bringing North and South Korea under one roof. All of a sudden, the two Koreas that, only weeks earlier, exchanged angry diatribes, accusing each other of perfidy, appeared to be on course to reconciliation, indeed, perhaps reunification.

During his conversation with Lee Hurak on May 4, 1972, Kim Il Sung suggested that the two sides maintain the strictest confidentiality with regard to their negotiations for fear that "foreigners" may attempt to derail them.³⁴ Judging by the now available record, the South Koreans most definitely did not observe this advice. Lee Hurak himself passed to the Americans not only the agreed documents but even the actual records of discussions between the two sides.³⁵ By contrast, Kim actually did keep a lot of these contacts mostly secret. The first time that the 'Great Leader' mentioned that something was happening behind the scenes was on April 9, 1972, when he told the Soviet Ambassador N.G. Sudarikov that the North Koreans had been having contacts with the South Koreans, citing a meeting with a South Korean general who, allegedly, claimed that the North would be wise to forgive the South Korean rulers their past sins, and also with an American-Korean who had visited Pyongyang to feel out Kim Il Sung's personal attitude towards Park Chung Hee.³⁶ Kim did not say a word about the secret channel to Lee Hurak that had been established a month earlier. In a later conversation, in June 1972, Kim again mentioned to Sudarikov that Pyongyang maintained secret contacts with the South, without elaborating.³⁷ Finally, on June 23, in a conversation with the Soviet Deputy Prime Minister, Kim disclosed his principles of reunification, as secretly presented to Park Chung Hee, and even mentioned that Park had already accepted them though he did not yet dare to say so publically.³⁸

Only on July 3, 1972 did the North Koreans officially confirm in a statement to Soviet and Eastern European ambassadors in Pyongyang that there had been secret talks. The DPRK deputy foreign

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume 19, Korea, 1969-1972*, 362-365. See also Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, 24.

³⁶ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, April 9, 1972.

³⁷ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, June 19, 1972, RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 33-37.

³⁸ Conversation between Ignatii Novikov and Kim Il Sung, June 23, 1972, RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 20-32.

minister, who brought the news, announced that “the South Koreans have adopted the correct policy of the DPRK government. This policy is correct since it represents the path to [our] victory.”³⁹ Perhaps the North Koreans kept the Chinese better informed of their secret diplomacy but no clear evidence has yet emerged to this effect. The evidence that we do have suggests that Kim Il Sung was so keen at this juncture to stress his political independence that he even discussed with Soviet leaders (and perhaps with Chinese leaders as well) the possibility of abrogating the 1961 Treaties of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the USSR and the PRC with an eye to pressing the South Koreans to cancel their own agreements with the Americans and the Japanese. Moscow did not like the idea, however, advising the ‘Great Leader’ to wait until it became clear whether the two Koreans would, in fact, reunify.⁴⁰

The fact that Kim kept matters of such importance generally secret from his supposed allies is not at all surprising: this was his standard mode of operation. But even if Moscow was not necessarily privy to the full scope of inter-Korean discussions, the ‘Great Leader’ did explain to the Soviets very candidly how he approached relations with South Korea and what he expected of his so called “peace offensive.” His explanations suggest that, far from postponing the question of the regime of united Korea to uncertain future, as he proposed to Lee Hurak, Kim had this question front and center of his plans for Korea. There are no surprises: Kim Il Sung expected reunified Korea to become Communist.

How could he be so optimistic in this regard? After all, in the 1960s South Korea was making astounding economic progress, growing at an average 8.6% per year – one of the highest rates in the world. After the growth rate topped 15% in 1969, the government had to intervene to prevent overheating.⁴¹ Exports boomed, construction soared, and Seoul was rapidly turning into a glittering metropolis. By contrast, North Korea was beginning to run out of steam due to unrealistic economic planning, the burden of military modernization, and the disruption of aid from China and the USSR. The first Seven Year Plan, launched in 1961, had to be extended for three years

³⁹ GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Note on Information by DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister, Comrade Kim Ryeongtaek, for Ambassadors and Acting Ambassadors of Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Mongolia, Romania, Hungary, and GDR on 3 July 1972 in the DPRK Foreign Ministry. PolA AA, MfAA, C 951/76.

⁴⁰ Mikhail Kapitsa, *Na Raznykh Parallellakh. Zapiski Diplomata* (Moscow: Kniga i Biznes, 1996), 240.

⁴¹ Samuel Kim, “Korea Acts to Temper Growth,” *NYT*, January 19, 1970, 59.

due to missed targets.⁴² In view of these realities one would be tempted to conclude that the real reason for Kim's "peace offensive" was Kim's realization that North Korea was falling behind its more prosperous neighbor or, in the words of historian Bradley Martin, that the 'Great Leader' needed some "breathing room."⁴³ In fact, in Kim's view, exactly the opposite was the case.

In 1971-72 Kim Il Sung continued to believe that North Korea was economically superior to South Korea, and that it was winning the economic competition between the two. To be fair to Kim, the change of fortunes was not yet obvious to even informed observers. For instance, even though the South Korean National Unification Board concluded as early as 1971 that the GNP per capita in the South outstripped that in the North, it was not until 1977 that the CIA came to a similar conclusion.⁴⁴ Kim had always emphasized the difficult conditions of the working people of South Korea, their horrid, miserable lives under the yoke of capitalist and imperialist exploitation. It is easy enough to dismiss such pronouncements as propaganda but at the time Kim's views in this regard were not altogether incompatible with foreign reporting from the ROK that highlighted how the South Korean workers "work long hours for little pay under harsh and sometimes dehumanizing conditions."⁴⁵ No wonder Kim remained optimistic. Discussing the situation south of the border in a conversation with the Soviet Ambassador on April 9, 1972, he highlighted Park Chung Hee's fear that South Korea would become "red." "The South Koreans are afraid to open their doors to us because chaos and unemployment reign there. Beggars and prostitutes roam the streets of Seoul. Although the city has some high buildings, there are [also] massive slums."⁴⁶ In a subsequent recollections Lee Hurak's chief of staff Lee Dongbok, argued that Kim Il Sung harbored the illusion that the North was far more prosperous. It was only after his delegates

⁴² "The Two Koreas – National Intelligence Estimate," May 11, 1972. CIA FOIA reading room.

⁴³ Bradley K. Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader: North Korea and the Kim Dynasty* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004),

⁴⁴ See comparison in Doowon Lee, "Inter-Korean economic relation: rivaled past, unbalanced present, and integrated future," *Yonsei Economic Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (March 1995), 136. Also, "Crisis and Confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, 1968-1969: A Critical Oral History" (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2010), 86-87.

⁴⁵ Philip Shabecoff, "South Korea's Economy Booming with Cheap Labor," *NYT*, May 12, 1970, 57.

⁴⁶ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, April 9, 1972.

returned from rounds of inter-Korean talks held in Seoul and described the actual conditions in the thriving Southern capital that Kim changed his opinion.⁴⁷

Lee Dongbok clearly underestimated the strength of the ‘Great Leader’s’ convictions. In fact, intensified contact with South Korea in 1972 only encouraged Kim Il Sung in the belief that things were falling apart in the South. In October 1972 he recounted the impressions of the North Korean Red Cross delegation that had visited Seoul the previous month. Kim said that hundreds of thousands of South Koreans lined up the streets to welcome the North Korean delegation, despite a heavy police presence. (This was true, although, perhaps, as *The New York Times* reported, “apparently more out of curiosity than anything else.”)⁴⁸ The South Koreans, the report continued, wanted to “put on display what they consider to be their economic and social achievements,” taking the northerners on a round of sightseeing and entertainment. But, according to Kim, it was the North Koreans who scored a propaganda coup by cleaning after themselves and polishing their own shoes. When the delegation was leaving their hotel in Seoul, the ‘Great Leader’ noted, a 20-year-old member of the service staff, tears in his eyes, told them that until then no one had treated him as well as the North Koreans had, no one called him ‘sir.’⁴⁹ Rather than the North Koreans being impressed by the South, Kim thought that it was the South Koreans who were impressed by the way things were in the North. He mentioned, for instance, that Lee Hurak was astounded by the DPRK’s progress. This is not to say that Kim thought that North Korea lived exceptionally well. He only too often acknowledged its various economic problems and used his frequent meetings with his allies to beg for aid (especially now that engagement with the South required that, as he put it, Pyongyang “clearly demonstrate the advantages of socialism” by rapid improvement in the living standards).⁵⁰ He just felt that things were better for the rank-and-file North Koreans than for the South Koreans and even for the Japanese.⁵¹ “We already have these

⁴⁷ Statement by Dr. Lee Dongbok, former Chief of Staff to Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) Director Lee Hurak made during the critical oral history conference “The Rise and Fall of Détente on the Korean Peninsula, 1970-1974,” Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, July 2, 2010.

⁴⁸ Richard Halloran, “North Koreans in Seoul as Red Cross Talks Open,” *NYT*, September 13, 1972, 2.

⁴⁹ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, October 9, 1972, RGANI fond 5, opis.64, delo 423, listy 38-53. Also GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Note on Information Provided by the Head of 1st Department of DPRK Foreign Ministry, Comrade Kim Jaesuk, October 3, 1972. PolA AA, MfAA, C 951/76.

⁵⁰ Conversation between Ignatii Novikov and Kim Il Sung, June 23, 1972, list 30.

⁵¹ Ibid.

advantages,” Kim went on. “We don’t have the unemployed, people without clothes or without shoes. There is free education, etc. When people from the South come here, they will see these advantages, as long as they look without prejudice.”⁵²

Kim’s confidence in the attractiveness of North Korea’s society was reflected in a rather peculiar (for a Communist dictatorship) insistence on “free travel” between North and South Korea. The issue was repeatedly raised by Pyongyang in the context of the Red Cross discussions, and encountered bitter resistance from the South Koreans who suspected (with good reason) that the northerners would use such free travel for Communist subversion. Kim Il Sung explained his rationale to the Soviet military delegation on April 24, 1972. “We are prepared to go there [to South Korea] and receive them [the South Koreans] here. However, Park Chung Hee is afraid of that. He is afraid that South Korea will become ‘red’, that it will be ‘communized,’ but we are not afraid to become ‘white’ if they come to us from the South. It seems that it is more difficult to turn red into white than white into red.”⁵³ The East Germans – who had plenty of experience in this regard – expressed a degree of caution about such an optimistic position. But Kim brushed off such comparisons. “The F[ederal] R[epublic of] G[ermany],” he told the Soviets, “is a powerful, mighty country, and it could swallow the GDR, whereas South Korea should not even try to swallow us, this is completely baseless.”⁵⁴

What Kim Il Sung had in mind was, rather, for North Korea to swallow the South. Getting there, though, was not as straightforward as Kim had previously believed. In the past – that is, during the height of Pyongyang’s militancy in the late 1960s – the North Korean leader had hoped to set off a revolutionary uprising in the South. Although that endeavor failed, Kim still believed that a revolution was possible. However, he now wanted to engage with a wider range of political forces than in the past. One important element that influenced his thinking was the April 1971 Presidential election, which Park Chung Hee nearly lost to an opposition candidate from the New Democratic Party, Kim Dae-jung. Park was able to hold on to his office, Kim told Nicolae Ceausescu weeks after the election, only because he mobilized the police and the army and falsified the results.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Conversation between Kim Il Sung and a Soviet military delegation, April 24, 1972. List 16.

⁵⁴ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, October 9, 1972.

⁵⁵ Conversation between Nicolae Ceausescu and Kim Il Sung, June 10, 1971.

What was promising about Kim Dae-jung, the 'Great Leader' explained, was that a lot of his positions, including calls for reunification and dialogue with the North, coincided with Pyongyang's; he only fell short in the sense that he failed to demand the withdrawal of American forces from South Korea. In spite of Kim Dae-jung's electoral defeat and Park Chung Hee's proclamation of "emergency" later that year, Kim Il Sung believed that the New Democratic Party and its leader remained a potent force in South Korean politics. As the 'Great Leader' confided to the Soviet Ambassador late in 1972, the North Koreans maintained confidential contacts with the New Democratic Party, from which they knew that, allegedly, Kim Dae-jung supported Pyongyang's long-standing proposal for a confederation of the two Koreas.⁵⁶ Kim Il Sung thus saw opportunities for using Kim Dae-jung in his political game.

These opportunities, and the potential endgame for unification, were elaborated in detail by the Vice Premier of the DPRK Chong Chun-taek during his October 1972 talks with the Czechoslovak leader Gustáv Husák. According to Chong, it proved impossible "to solve" the South Korean problem (i.e. to carry out a revolution there) relying on just the underground work. Therefore, Kim Il Sung's present aim was to prevent Park Chung Hee from suppressing the New Democratic Party and the DPRK-backed "United Revolutionary Party" (the underground Communist party in South Korea) and, down the road, to include their representatives in the South Korean part of a confederate government that Kim sought to create. If these parties were allowed to operate freely, the situation in the South would change from a 1:1 political deadlock to a 1:2 or perhaps even a 1:3 ratio favoring North Korea. Democratization in South Korea, Chong explained, would allow the Communists to rapidly increase their influence and strengthen the revolutionary forces. The key issue, given the political instability, was "not to scare" the Japanese and the Americans. "If we upset them, they could organize a coup," concluded Chong.⁵⁷ As Kim Il Sung succinctly summarized this policy a few days later: "Our goal is to democratize the South Korean society, gradually revolutionizing it, and, for this, to obtain greater room for contacts with progressively inclined politicians and the population of the South."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Conversation between Gustáv Husák and Chong Chuntaek, October 2, 1972, RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 108-123.

⁵⁸ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, October 9, 1972.

But the North Korean leader was also looking to cast a wider net. The very nature of his relationship with Park Chung Hee suggests that he was not averse to approaching unification from a very different angle by capitalizing on endless bickering and rivalry among various political players in the South. Kim spoke of alleged animosity between Park and his Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil, and also between Park and Lee Hurak. The three of them, he explained, were like a “pack of dogs,” united by little but their common hunger for political power.⁵⁹ As a proof of that, Kim cited the 1970 murder of the “very beautiful” 25-year old Jeong In-suk, a hostess at a Seoul restaurant, who, he said, had been having sex with all three of them. “Now they are asking in Seoul: who had relations with her and who killed her?”⁶⁰ The point here is not that Kim knew of rivalries in Park’s circle – this was very much public knowledge – or that he would recycle tabloid rumors and engage in conspiracy theories. The point, rather, is what conclusion the ‘Great Leader’ drew from all of the above. His conclusion was that Park Chung Hee was in a very vulnerable position and that he was looking for a way out through unification talks. According to Chong Chun-taek, one of the issues that Kim Il Sung debated in his circle was whether Park’s interest in rapprochement with the North or whether he was being prodded by the Americans.⁶¹ The implication here was that if it really was Park and not Lee Hurak (whom Kim thought to be a pro-American in Park’s circle) who pushed forward with the North-South contacts, then perhaps his situation really was desperate for him, both domestically and in terms of foreign relations, and this created opportunities, which Kim Il Sung could exploit in his own interests. “Our aim,” argued in this connection one of Kim Il Sung’s lieutenants and Secretary of the Korean Workers’ Party Kim Dongju, “is to isolate Park Chung Hee both from the Americans and from the Japanese, so that he would have only one way out: to surrender to us.”⁶²

The 1972 endgame

The uncertain road to inter-Korean rapprochement reached a key turning point in October 1972. On October 12 the South Koreans called for a high-level meeting of the Coordinating Committee

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Conversation between Gustáv Husák and Chong Chuntaek, October 2, 1972.

⁶² Conversation between N.M. Shubnikov and Kim Dongju, August 24, 1972, RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 96-103.

at Panmunjom, surprising the North, which had grown increasingly restless with Seoul's perceived foot-dragging in the post July 4 negotiations. Seeing this development as a positive outcome of Pyongyang's "pressure" on his southern nemesis, Kim Il Sung sent Bak Seongcheol to hear Lee Hurak out. At the meeting, Bak unleashed a barrage of criticism against South Korea. "We told them directly," a high-ranking North Korean official Kim Young-nam explained days later to the Soviets – "are you for peaceful reunification of the motherland, or are you for anti-Communism? ... If you want to continue the anti-Communist line, why do we need a dialogue?" Lee Hurak reportedly accepted this criticism and even appeared interested in Kim Il Sung's idea of a confederation of two Koreas, quizzing Bak on how that would work in practice. At the end of the meeting, Lee Hurak asked the North Koreans "to trust him."⁶³ This strange meeting was a precursor to even stranger developments.

On October 15, 1972 the South Koreans dialed up the direct telephone line that now connected Seoul and Pyongyang and conveyed a proposal to hold another meeting at Panmunjom. According to the North Koreans, this meeting took place on October 16 and the South Korean representative conveyed a special message from Lee Hurak. Lee allegedly accepted "full blame" for the fact that inter-Korean negotiations had stalled (it's hard to trust the North Koreans to have accurately recounted his apology, though) and announced that North and South Korea must – "no matter what" – achieve their reunification in the 1970s, while Kim and Park remained at the helm. The South Koreans then proclaimed that both Park Chung Hee and Lee Hurak "passionately desire to reunify the country but as there was strong opposition in South Korea, they had to establish order in the country." These cryptic references were followed by an advice to listen carefully to Park Chung Hee's statement on October 17.⁶⁴

At the appointed time, on October 17, 1972 Park Chung Hee, citing the need to carry out a "successful dialogue with North Korea," proclaimed martial law, shut colleges and universities, and imposed press censorship. The National Assembly was also dissolved.⁶⁵ An hour before Park's 7pm declaration, the South Koreans called up Pyongyang and asked for another meeting on the

⁶³ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Young Nam, October 19, 1972, RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 128-136.

⁶⁴ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Young Nam, October 19, 1972.

⁶⁵ "South Korean Chief Orders Martial Law," *NYT*, October 18, 1972, 1.

following day, when the North was handed Lee Hurak's message for Kim Il Sung's brother to the effect that the international situation had changed, and that South Korea must "solve the national question through our own means without the reliance on the United States and Japan." The South Korean government would therefore adopt a new constitution to "correspond to the peaceful unification of the country" and to counter American and Japanese efforts against South Korean "self-determination." Lee Hurak argued that there was domestic opposition in the ROK against the July 4 Declaration. By declaring martial law Park sought to overcome these obstacles and to "avoid chaos in our country".⁶⁶

The North Korean leadership was perplexed by these moves. On the one hand, by brutally squashing the eggs in Kim Il Sung's democratic basket, Park Chung Hee seriously upset the 'Great Leader's' strategy of promoting democracy qua revolution. On the other hand, all of this was being done in a rather conspiratorial fashion, and could be interpreted – with a good dose of wishful thinking, which Kim always possessed in abundance – as a part of Park's method of "surrender" to the North. The KWP Political Committee discussed these developments on the night of October 17. Kim Il Sung had no illusions that what Park wanted to accomplish was to undercut the opposition, in order, as he said, "to avoid a situation of some other force in South Korea cooperating with the DPRK" and also to prolong his stay in power. Initially, Kim decided to lash out against Park's coup. A relevant article was already prepared by the North Korean party newspaper Rodong Sinmun. But then Kim had a change of heart. If the article was published, he later explained, Lee Hurak (who was expected in Pyongyang) would not come, and the dialogue would collapse. In this "complicated and very delicate situation," Kim explained, he decided "to keep the doors open, because [the DPRK] was the first to knock on them."⁶⁷ The point was elaborated the following day by the North Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Ri Manseok: "The South Korean side has only opened the door to the North since it was forced to do so. Currently it is looking for reasons to withdraw from this commitment. It is our conclusion that we must not

⁶⁶ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Young Nam, October 19, 1972.

⁶⁷ Conversation between N.G. Sudarikov and Kim Il Sung, November 7, 1972, RGANI: fond 5, opis 64, delo 423, listy 55-64.

provide them with a pretext: This way we will lose all opportunities to unfold in South Korea the activities of political opposition parties, and other activities as well.”⁶⁸

The November meeting of the South-North Coordination Committee in Pyongyang was the last opportunity for the North to turn the tide while relations with the regime in Seoul seemed to be in danger of deteriorating. For the second time in 1972, a direct meeting between Kim Il Sung and Lee Hurak was arranged for 3 November upon the latter’s request. Kim used the opportunity to push for wider economic and social contacts between the two Koreas. He emphasized how mighty Korea would be if it were reunified and, as before, lamented how great powers “ruled small nations by splitting them apart.” Kim also appeared keen to move on from non-political to political cooperation and ventured to say that “if President Park and I have our wills put together, [political unification] can happen in a day.” In a vain effort to allay Lee’s suspicions, Kim even promised that he would not seek to chair the new confederation but would instead return to philosophy and write books. At the same time, he told Lee not to fear socialism, making comparisons between his Juche ideology and Egypt’s Gamal Abdul Nasser, Indonesia’s Sukarno, and Somali’s Siad Barre: “They were all nationalists mistaken for socialists.”⁶⁹ Yet when the meeting was over the DPRK ultimately arrived at a sober conclusion: the “main objective” of the Southern regime was “to stay in power and petrify the status quo.”

On December 13, 1972, Park Chung Hee proclaimed the new (Yushin) constitution. He could now serve any number of six-year terms, unimpeded by electoral challenges like the one he had to suffer in 1971. Park’s executive powers were also limitless. He could pass decrees as laws and override the National Assembly, a third of which he also got to appoint.⁷⁰ The Yushin Constitution allowed Park to consolidate his autocratic rule in South Korea for the remainder of the decade. The talks with the North thus played were thus a diversionary maneuver on Park’s road to dictatorship. “Even to this day,” the former KCIA North Korea Bureau chief later recalled, “I wonder whether

⁶⁸ GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Note on Information by DPRK Deputy Foreign Minister, Comrade Ri Manseok, for Ambassadors of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and GDR on 8 November 1972 in the DPRK Foreign Ministry. PolA AA, MfAA, C 951/76.

⁶⁹ Conversation between Lee Hurak and Kim Il Sung, November 3, 1972, <http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/113235>.

⁷⁰ Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 160.

[KCIA] Director Lee Hurak had *Yushin* in mind when he first initiated North-South dialogue” in Korea.⁷¹ Lee Hurak’s chief of staff supported this interpretation in 2010, describing Lee as having plotted a lifetime presidential system in South Korea since 1971, after Park’s hard-fought presidential election. Indeed, in early 1972, Lee Hurak sent delegations abroad to study the presidential dictatorships of Jiang Jieshi in Taiwan, Francisco Franco in Spain, and Juan Peron in Argentina, a pointer to what Park Chung Hee had in mind even as he decided to reciprocate Kim Il Sung’s feelers for inter-Korean dialogue.⁷²

In the meantime, in December 1972, North Korea adopted a new constitution of its own. Juche was confirmed as the guiding principle of domestic and foreign policy. Kim Il Sung assumed the title of the President (in contrast to his more modest position of “Premier”), while his personality cult in the DPRK reached unprecedented heights. In the course of 1973, as reported by the Eastern bloc diplomats, Kim began to groom a successor, Kim Jong Il, appointing him to positions in the organization and propaganda departments. These moves were carefully obscured in order to avoid the impression of hereditary succession in an ostensibly Marxist-Leninist country. While inter-Korean meetings continued in 1973, no practical results were achieved, with each side looking for a face-saving way out that would allow them to blame the other side for the breakdown of the dialogue. On April 20, 1973, KWP politburo member and Central Committee secretary Kim Dongju stated that the Joint Declaration could not be realistically implemented due to Park Chung Hee’s obstructionism. The only way forward, according to Kim, was to rely on the South Korean opposition parties. Thus the DPRK had no other choice but to continue “unmasking” South Korea “before the entire world” as the party opposed to Korean unification.⁷³

Conclusion

⁷¹ Statement Ambassador Kang Indeok, former ROK Director of the North Korea Bureau of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) under President Park Chung Hee, 9 September 2008. Conference Summary, “Crisis and Confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, 1968-1969: A Critical Oral History,” North Korean International Documentation Project Washington D.C./University of North Korean Studies Seoul, 138.

⁷² Statement Dr. Lee Dongbok, former Chief of Staff to KCIA Director Lee Hurak, 2 July 2010. Conference “The Rise and Fall of Détente on the Korean Peninsula, 1970-1974: A Critical Oral History.”

⁷³ GDR Embassy Pyongyang, Note on Dinner by Ambassador Everhartz for Comrade Kim Dongju, Member of Korean Workers Party Politburo and Central Committee Secretary on 20 April 1973, PoIA AA, MfAA, C 6852.

Over the years of his rule in North Korea, Kim Il Sung had earned a reputation of a shrewd, calculating politician skilled in intrigue and manipulation. Consideration of his policies in the early 1970s yields plenty of evidence to support Lee Hurak's one-time assessment that Kim was "highly intelligent and far superior to any of the other North Korean officials he met."⁷⁴ In the words of the U.S. Secretary of State William P. Rogers, Kim Il Sung was "smart as hell."⁷⁵ The year of 1972 was arguably the high point of Kim Il Sung's statesmanship. His "peace offensive" seemed to have created considerable momentum. For some brief months, Kim seemed to be driving the process of reconciliation in Korea, putting Park Chung Hee under pressure. Internationally, instead of sulking at their allies' perfidy, as the North Vietnamese had done, the North Korean leader tried to play Beijing against Moscow in the hope of maximizing his independence from both while gaining leverage for forcing the U.S. out of Korea.

For all these efforts, Kim Il Sung failed to realize any of his goals. The Americans were not interested in a complete withdrawal and did not seriously respond to probes for a bilateral dialogue with the North. Kissinger's approach, as recent studies have shown, was to outsource the solution to the Korean problem to the Chinese in the expectation that somehow Beijing could prevail on Kim Il Sung to accept the notion of long-term stability in Korea, which would be guaranteed by all great powers.⁷⁶ It is fair to say that Kissinger overestimated China's influence on North Korea but Kim was clearly even more misguided in his hope of dislodging the Americans from the South just by presenting a more reasonable façade than he had in the late 1960s. The biggest problem for Kim was that in the end neither the Soviets nor the Chinese were willing to put his interests above their own. Even as his expectation that the U.S. would withdraw from the Korean peninsula as a result of Nixon's breakthroughs in Beijing and Moscow began to fade, he continued to hope that he would be able to ease America's way out of Korea via implementation of the July 4 declaration on the Northern terms. The fact that Kim Il Sung put so much hope on this scenario only suggests that whether or not he was "smart as hell," he had no conception of what was realistically possible, and so was he was bound to be gravely disappointed. Kim's hopes to achieve "democratization" in South Korea, paving way to an

⁷⁴ *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume 19, Korea, 1969-1972*, 348.

⁷⁵ NSC meeting, August 14, 1969, *FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume 19, Korea, 1969-1972*, p. pp. 362-365, 90.

⁷⁶ Charles Armstrong and John Barry Kotch, "Sino-American negotiations on Korea and Kissinger's UN diplomacy," 133.

eventual pro-Northern revolution, also came to nothing. Instead, Park Chung Hee, who, Kim believed to be so weak and impotent in 1972, outplayed him at every point, imposing a dictatorship in Seoul by the end of the year that would last all the way until Park's assassination in 1979 and for another decade thereafter.

By then, North Korea was an economic dwarf next to its powerful southern neighbor. It was also gradually losing support of its long-time allies, China and the USSR. In such grim circumstances, Kim wanted little more than regime survival. His pursuit of the atomic bomb was a manifestation of this hard-boiled realism, the ultimate guarantee of averting the fate that befell his Eastern European allies, and in particular East Germany, in 1989. In 1972, though, Kim gleamed with confidence. He acted from strength, not weakness. Kim Il Sung seriously thought he could succeed in uniting Korea on his terms. His confidence stemmed from a misreading of the economic trends on the Korean peninsula, and the relative balance of power between the United States on the one hand, and China and the USSR on the other. In a sense, Kim Il Sung became a victim of his own propaganda about the strength of the DPRK, just as the objective evidence began to point in a different direction.

If Kim Il Sung ultimately sought to impose a Communist system on the South, was Park Chung Hee wrong in his hardline repression of Communist or pro-Northern activities? Were Park to comment from beyond the grave on the new evidence on Kim Il Sung's thinking in 1972, he would undoubtedly say: see, I told you so. All of Kim's golden words about national unity and reconciliation masked his basic aspiration to extend his rule to the South. In this sense, it is incorrect to argue that, should the Chinese have shown greater interest in resolving the Korean problem, or should the Soviets have been more cooperative, or should the Americans put greater pressure on Park Chung Hee, it would have been possible to attain a different outcome what the one that prevailed. Yet, even as we can now confidently say what Kim Il Sung really wanted, we can also see very clearly that he vastly overestimated his capabilities of getting there. Kim believed he could bring about a pro-Northern revolution in South Korea. Park Chung Hee argued the same, using the alleged threat from Pyongyang to rule with an iron hand, brutally suppressing all opposition for years to come.

Yet precisely because Kim Il Sung overestimated his capabilities, the so called Communist threat to South Korea was not as great as Park Chung Hee made it out to be. Curbing State powers and allowing a degree of political liberalization was not going to cause political chaos of a Communist revolution in the South. By contrast, a dialogue between North Korea and a more democratic South Korea would have had a more lasting impact on the DPRK over the long term. It would have brought about deeper engagement between the two Koreas at cultural and social, if not political, levels. Even though reunification was not in the cards, such engagement would have helped in building up confidence North and South of the 38th parallel. Instead, by embracing Yushin, Park Chung Hee effectively allowed Kim Il Sung to backtrack from the experiment that Kim, in his over-confidence, had himself begun. In time, the South Koreans realized their strength and under President Roh Tae-woo in the late 1980s, they went knocking on Pyongyang's door through *nordpolitik*. But by then, his confidence of Northern superiority long shattered, Kim Il Sung kept that door firmly shut. It remains shut even today.